Van Els, Paul / Queen, Sarah A. (eds.) (2017): *Between History and Philosophy: Anecdotes in Early China* (SUNY Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture). Albany: State University of New York Press, IX + 376 pp., ISBN: 978-1-4384-6611-8.

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As the editors of this volume point out, anecdotes are "part and parcel of the literary tradition of early China" (p. 2), but so far "have received surprisingly little scholarly attention as a distinctive form of writing" (p. 3). The contributions aim to remedy this shortcoming, setting about to demonstrate how anecdotes could convey philosophical arguments (Andrew Seth Meyer; Christian Schwermann); add a novel ideological hue to the portrayal of a philosophical patron figure (Lee Ting-mien); negotiate unstable notions of cultural identity and otherness (Li Wai-yee); convey nuanced judgements about virtue in politics (Sarah A. Queen); and reconcile diverging genre conventions in representations of the past (Rens Krijgsman).

Taking up broader issues of philosophical discourse, text formation, and historical changes in the utilisation of narrative material, the contributions also address non-deductive argumentation (Paul R. Goldin); questions of authorship and compositional techniques in an anecdote collection (Christian Schwermann); anecdote usage as diagnostic criterion for the identification of an entire work's ideological orientation and textual strata (Du Heng); narrative historiographic formats not centred on moralising, anecdotal narratives (Yuri Pines); and the declining significance of the ancient stock of anecdotal lore as a source of inspiration from the Eastern Han onwards (Paul van Els).

In all, the essays, including the editors' introduction, contribute to the understanding of early Chinese historiography and thought as well as to ongoing discussions about how the early literary heritage was remoulded and digested by authors and editors up to and including the Han.

Van Els and Queen's introduction discusses genre features of anecdotes as defined by historians of Western literatures (pp. 4–7) and as exemplified by early Chinese writings (pp. 7–24). The upshot is that anecdotes should be viewed as freestanding narratives with a specific setting, frequently, but not exclusively, staging historical personalities or incidents, and with a clearly defined beginning, middle, and end, which sometimes consists in a punch line (p. 8). Anecdotes are, furthermore, considered to be more salient elements in Chinese

than Western historiography (see, however, Pines's essay for an exception). They served to make philosophical points, though their meaning can be subject to modification depending on how they are framed, as van Els and Queen argue (pp. 1–2, 13–16).

Here, an alternative view might be pointed out. Newell Ann Van Auken argues that accounts accompanied by evaluative comments of a "noble man" (*junzi* 君子) in *Zuozhuan* 左傳 display a close interdependence between content and frame, which jointly guide the reader towards a particular moral judgement. In these cases, narrative and frame were likely introduced into the *Zuozhuan* as single textual units, though some of them show traces of further editorial manipulation.[1] There are, then, additional ways to conceive of the relationship between frame, narrative, and intended import other than the one envisioned by the editors of the volume.

Introducing common non-deductive modes of argumentation, Paul R. Goldin discusses instances of paradox, analogy, and appeal to example. Despite the prevalence of these rhetorical tools, deductions expressible in the formalisms of propositional logic are not absent from early Chinese thought (pp. 51–55). But, Goldin observes, they "are not easy to find; one can only surmise that they were not preferred." In Goldin's interpretation, Chinese thinkers rather leaned towards modes of expression the nuances of which have to be unlocked by sympathetic understanding. "Chinese philosophy, like literature, painting, or music, requires connoisseurship. If we lack the taste – even more so if we exempt ourselves from the task of developing it – we will miss most of what Chinese philosophy has to offer." (p. 55)

Two questions arise from this. First, in order to arrive at a meaningful comparison, how common was deductive argumentation in various strands of Western philosophy? It has been suggested that logic in its modern, technical sense has only limited purchase in everyday reasoning and colloquial argumentation.[2] Possibly, across different schools and centuries, philosophical argumentation as well may have been less strictly wedded to the rules of formal logic than the recent stress on such in analytical philosophy might lead one to believe. Second, how does one attain "connoisseurship", beyond mere exposure to Chinese philosophy? And is Western philosophy likewise open to a connoisseurial approach?

1 Van Auken 2016.

2 Mercier and Sperber 2017: 158–168.

Andrew Seth Meyer traces variant versions of the "sojourn narrative" (p. 64 *et passim*) about Confucius's hardship between the states of Chen and Cai, a body of material already insightfully analysed by John Makeham.[3] Meyer senses a fundamental interpretative shift in the early history of this cluster of narratives. In "the simplest version of the tale" in *Lunyu* 15.2 (p. 66), the story supposedly revolves around the fact that Confucius and his followers go "publicly hungry", "a clear sign of status degradation" for *shi* 士, "marking them as having fallen from the circle of 'gentlemen' entitled to a share of meat from the ancestral altars." (p. 67) But is the practice of sharing sacrificial meat relevant to the situation of a group of travellers?[4] More importantly, the *Lunyu* speaks of *junzi* 君子 (Meyer's "gentlemen"), not *shi*. The former term is generally understood to refer to a moral exemplar, the latter, initially at least, to a member of the lower aristocracy. It is not a foregone conclusion that starving in public, or poverty more generally, would automatically be taken to impugn someone's moral credentials. Early Chinese discourses on poverty and morality appear rather complex and in need of further research.[5] If *junzi*, however, should be taken as a reference to social status, this would require additional clarification.

Moreover, the dialogue hinges on the sense of *qiong* 窮: being reduced to extremity. Is *that* something which could happen to a *junzi*? Thus enquires a Zilu whose trust in the order of things is palpably shaken. One may consider this an invitation to ponder whether, or why, bad things can happen to good people; other versions have done just that, as Meyer shows. On this understanding, it is far from obvious that the *Xunzi* version of the narrative "shifts focus" (p. 69), as

3 Makeham 1998.

4 On sacrificial meat as a medium to reinforce hierarchies as well as networks of mutual recognition and indebtedness among ancient Chinese elites, see Boileau 2006. Gifts of meat are part of a more comprehensive ritual system, and it is not obvious that the present context would be part of it.

5 To throw in some anecdotal evidence: In *Xinxu* 7.25: 970–974 (with parallels), a *shi* rather starves to death than accept food from a robber. Elsewhere, a man likewise refuses food because he feels he is being patronised. He dies as a result. A critical comment by Zengzi is appended: The man should have accepted his benefactor's apology and eaten the food. The protagonist's social status is not specified. (*Liji* 4.2, "Tan Gong xia": 298; see Boileau 2006: 766; cf. *Xinxu* 7.24: 967–970). In *Mengzi* 3B.10, Master Meng criticises a *shi* from a wealthy noble house who, out of an exaggerated sense of self-righteousness, refuses any presents from his family, going so far as to vomit up a gifted goose. Only an "earthworm", Meng sneers, could live like that (Lau 2003: 144–147). In another story, the poor Yuan Xian upbraids the ostentatiously wealthy Zigong, arguing that being true to one's moral and scholarly ideals is preferable to being rich, and happily accepting the epithet "poor" (*Hanshi waizhuan* 1: 36; tr. Hightower 1952: 19–21). In these narratives, it is not so much poverty itself that is at issue but the moral attitudes and sense of dignity espoused by those who experience it.

Meyer, claims, or whether "gentlemanly status" (p. 70) is at issue rather than the interdependence, or otherwise, of someone's fate and morality.

Likewise, one may quibble over whether the cluster of sojourn narratives addresses "logical problems" (p. 73). The adjective "logical" makes frequent appearances throughout the essay, but the questions at the heart of the sojourn narrative in its various incarnations seem concerned with aspects of metaphysics: Does moral excellence count for anything in the workings of fate? Or, in other words: Is the cosmos indifferent towards morality?

The final part of the essay is taken up by a comparison of "philosophical uses of narrative in early China and ancient Greece" (pp. 80–85). It consists largely of observations about Plato's *Euthyphro* and *Republic* as compared to an assortment of ancient Chinese narratives. The conclusion pits "Greek philosophers like Socrates", who were "in competition with priests like Euthyphro" and thus found themselves drawn into disputes about "pure reason", against "the authors of Chinese Masters' writings", who were "handicapped by their low [...] birth status" and therefore "had every incentive to maximally value the empirical knowledge gained from personal experience" (p. 85).

These observations lead rather far afield, thus I will restrict myself to brief comments. Euthyphro is never identified as a priest. But this detail aside, what reason is there to assume that priests were the main opponents of ancient philosophers rather than some of Plato's other bugbears, such as poets or sophists? Credible alternative visions of some varieties of Greek philosophy exist, for instance as path to wisdom through cultivation of certain ways of life, each informed and motivated by a particular philosophical outlook.[6] The notion of Chinese thinkers inclining towards empirical knowledge would benefit from some elaboration. This is not the place – nor do I feel qualified – to try and unravel long-standing debates about the respective nature of Greek and Chinese philosophy; about whether proto-scientific enquiry into the natural world was a distinctive mark of the former; or whether the latter should be termed philosophy at all. Suffice it to say that some strands of Greek thought put a premium on empirical investigation. Aristotle, for instance, famously engaged in meticulous observation of natural phenomena.[7] By contrast, one of the hoary clichés about Chinese thought assures us that Chinese thinkers were more interested in moral precepts than empirical issues, and less concerned with social reality than social ideals. In this light, some readers might ask for more additional evidence in order to be fully convinced.

6 Hadot 2002; Cooper 2012.

7 For a captivating popular treatment see, e. g. Leroi 2014.

Like parts of the introduction (pp. 1–2, 11–16) and Meyer's and van Els's (pp. 334–348) essays, Lee Ting-mien's study of a narrative about Mo Di's 墨翟 successful intervention against an impending attack on Song 宋 by Chu 楚 focusses on a detailed comparison of variants of the same story. Unlike other renderings, the ending of the *Mozi* 墨子 version, Lee states, contradicts both the main body of the narrative and central ideas advanced elsewhere in *Mozi*. Achievements which benefit the people and agree with the will of higher powers such as heaven and the spirits should lead to illustriousness, according to the teachings of the *Mozi* (p. 98). But the *Mozi* narrates how Mo Di's good deed ultimately goes unrecognised and, at the same time, endorses this as an expression of Mo Di's activity in the sphere of the numinous (*shen* 神) rather than in the open (*ming* 明), an element which adds "Daoist tinges" (p. 106) to the story.

To plumb "cultural attitudes" toward "barbarians", Li Wai-yee addresses three themes as reflected in anecdotes: the contrast between *wen* 文 and *zhi* 質, "refinement" and "substance"; "tradition and transformation"; and "the rhetorical contexts of policy arguments and diplomatic confrontations." (p. 114) The stories discussed by Li illustrate the fluid and permeable boundaries between Chinese and others, the "notion that cultural difference is not immutable" (p. 134), but also the function of the non-Chinese "to question or reverse established perspectives" (p. 139). One may wonder, though, whether use of the term "barbarian" is still desirable, or even defensible.

Selecting *Shuoyuan* chapter nine, "Rectifying Remonstrance" (Zheng jian 正諫), as object of a case study, Christian Schwermann revisits questions about authorship, the composition of new writings from pre-existing materials, and the argumentative force of collage-style texts, which he has previously addressed elsewhere.[8] The essay contains a welter of additional insights, for instance on the reading of Liu Xiang's 劉向 (79–8 BCE) memorial upon the submission of the *Shuoyuan* (pp. 150–153); uses and meanings of the cognate verbs *shuo* / *shui* 說 "to explain" / "to persuade" (pp. 153–156, 167); and compositional techniques conferring a sense of formal unity upon the "textual fabric" of writings which, like *Shuoyuan*, were woven together from heterogeneous materials (pp. 148–150).

Schwermann concludes this wide-ranging investigation with the observation that Liu Xiang should be promoted from the rank of textual critic and editor to that of fully-fledged author: "The *Shuoyuan* was not only 'arranged' or 'compiled' but *composed* by Liu Xiang, who may even have conceived of himself as the author of the text" (p. 167; italics in the original). This view chimes with Bret

8 On the creation of new texts from old ones see Schwermann 2005, on authorship, see Schwermann's contribution and co-authored introduction to Schwermann and Steineck ed. 2014.

Hinsch's assessment of Liu Xiang's role in producing the *Lienü zhuan* 列女傳, which is, in turn, based on the exhaustive textual studies of Shimomi Takao 下見隆雄.[9] Hinsch concluded that Liu Xiang should be regarded "as both the author and editor of China's first collection of female biographies, although his original contribution to the work seems paramount."[10]

In a piece of textual scholarship which combines attention to detail with a treatment of broader questions, Du Heng identifies "patterns among the Confucius anecdotes" in *Han Feizi* and uses these to "map larger shifts throughout the text" (p. 193). The essay, which is based on Du's MA thesis, divides *Han Feizi* into three large blocks consisting of "univocal" expositions of Han Fei's teachings ("Cluster A": ch. 1–20), anecdotes ("Cluster B": ch. 21–23, 30–39), and "polyphonic" expositions ("Cluster C": ch. 40–51) (p. 195), with some chapters falling between these categories (ch. 40, 42, 43) (p. 219). The main objectives of the two types of exposition differ (pp. 196–204). Cluster A revolves around "the power struggle between the ruler and his subjects" (p. 196) and the often precarious role of the specialist in "laws" or "standards" (*fa* 法) vis-à-vis "rogue courtiers" or "villainous ministers" (p. 200). Cluster C, by contrast, "is enmeshed in polyphonic polemics" (p. 199) between *fa* specialists and "learned men" (p. 200), so that, instead of attempts at persuasion addressing the ruler, "a new type of game emerges, which is far more akin to intellectual debate" (p. 201). The collected anecdotes making up Cluster B, Du argues in some detail, assume a transitional position between the two. Here, diverging views are for the first time admitted, most notably in the "Nan" 難 chapters, which refute received opinion on historical events and personalities (pp. 205–216). Treatments of Confucius shift in character from being neutral or sympathetic to becoming more adversarial in the course of this larger transformation of rhetorical modes and intents, so they can be regarded as a diagnostic features of it (203–204, 211–214).

Du still hesitates to commit to any definitive interpretation of these larger changes as reflecting either historico-biographical developments affecting the author or, rather, later editorial choices (pp. 217–221). She stresses, however, that "these two possibilities are not mutually exclusive" and that "it is often difficult to separate functional design from diachronic development" (p. 217). It is to be hoped that she will continue her investigations into *Han Feizi* and, perhaps, also apply her skills as a textual scholar to decode the editorial rationale behind other compilations.

9 Hinsch 2007: 5–7.

10 Hinsch 2007: 22.

As an exegetical work obsessively focussed on the wording of the *Chunqiu* 春秋 annals and their hidden significance, the *Gongyang zhuan* 公羊傳 is not typically read for its narratives. Sarah Queen investigates the "compliant and subservient vision of service" expressed in stories about "[f]ive types of Worthies (*xian* 賢) and their negative counterfoils" in *Gongyang zhuan*, in order to "understand the distinctive ethico-political ethos of these exemplary tales" (p. 232). Typologically, Queen divides these exemplary figures into "worthy protectors" (pp. 232–241) and "worthy avengers" (pp. 241–245) of their rulers, "worthy regents" (pp. 245–247), "worthy abdicators" (pp. 247–250) and "devotees of ritual propriety and trustworthiness" (pp. 250–252). In Queen's interpretation, as "indispensable exegetical tool" "the historical narratives added flesh to the bones of Confucius's judgments"; they "appear when the predominant praise and blame mode of explication tied exclusively to the wording of a given entry cannot fully disclose the ethical nuances of the judgment at hand." (pp. 252–253)

Yuri Pines investigates "history without anecdotes"—modes of historiographic writing which do not highlight narrative illustrations of political or moral points. Having identified narratives in the *Zuozhuan* which "differ from the moralizing histories of the Warring States and later periods" in that they are "detailed to the point of boredom" and "lacking" in "a clear-cut moral message" (p. 270), Pines then sets out to read the *Xinian* 繫年, a manuscript purchased by Tsinghua University in Beijing bearing a chronologically arranged historiographic text "composed [...] in the state of Chu" from "earlier sources" (p. 272), as a work with similar characteristics.[11] These writings, he avers, provided "historical knowledge for policymakers" and exemplify "an important yet neglected genre of non-didactic history" (p. 264). As Pines argues (pp. 274–281), such "non-moralizing" history writing in the "non-anecdotal" mode would have been suited to satisfy the demands of "leading policymakers, the ruler and his closest advisers, who were in need of working knowledge of the historical background for the current balance of power", perhaps in the form of a "brief resumé of major geopolitical shifts in the past rather than of detailed narrative." (p. 287)

Like Pines, Rens Krijgsman also discusses a text from the Tsinghua corpus. He argues that the *Bao xun* 保 [= 寶] 訓, "Treasured Instructions", which he translates in full, instantiates an uneasy mixture of genres, the "documentary" mode of relaying public speeches of past rulers, most prominently encountered in the canonical *Shangshu* 尚書 but also found in the non-canonical *Yi Zhou shu* 逸周書, and the anecdotal mode of narrative. This, Krijgsman asserts, "generates

11 For a full, annotated translation, see now Milburn 2016. See also Pines 2014 for a study of *Xinian* which makes some of the same points as the essay under discussion.

a fundamental tension between genre and argument", and "the *Baoxun* employs a number of strategies to mediate this tension." (p. 307) But aside from brief remarks on aetiological elements in the frame narrative (p. 313) and repetitions of formulas (pp. 315, 316–317), the discussion remains vague, and some attempts at conceptual clarification, like the introduction of characterisations such as "*predicative*" for documentary-type writings and "*attributive*" for anecdotes (pp. 306–307; italics in the original) seem downright obscure. One may also wonder whether the references to the past which are here dubbed "anecdotes" (pp. 314–315) are anything of the sort: they report summarily rather than tell, they have no punch line, and as condensed reports of purported historical facts about sage rulers from a "foundational period" (p. 315) they would not seem out of place in some chapters of the canonical *Shangshu*.[12] Does one find similar tensions, similarly resolved as posited here, in the *Shangshu* as well? It would bolster the plausibility of the argument if such cases could be pointed out. Lastly, the theoretical contextualisation of *Bao xun* by reference to supposedly universal features in ancient societies' ways of reconceptualising the past, as encapsulated in Jan Assmann's idea of cultural memory, is interesting (pp. 317–320). But it seems to this reviewer that such interpretations encumber the scant evidence of the *Bao xun* with too heavy a theoretical burden.

Concluding the volume, one of the editors, Paul van Els, reflects on why creative engagement with the stock of classic historical anecdotes that kept recurring in texts up to the end of the Western Han began to fade thereafter. By way of illustration, van Els first discusses no less than six variant versions of an historical narrative about Duke Wen 文 of Jin 晉 (r. 636–628 BCE) from writings up to and including the Western Han, noting that they represent distinct reactualisations deliberately composed to convey different arguments. Already in the Eastern Han, though, interest in the story was markedly

12 Nylan 2001: 124 notes that "[o]nly a handful of chapters, including the famous Pan Geng chapter, intersperse rhetorical speeches with short accounts of specific deeds." Among such chapters is also "Yao dian" 堯典. References to past actions and events in direct speech occur as well. In "Gao Yao mo" 皋陶謨, Yu 禹 tells about the flood and how he saved the people (Gu and Liu 2005: 433; trans. in Karlgren 1950: 9, no. 9). In the same chapter, Yu is warned not to be arrogant like Zhu of Dan 朱丹 who "without water went in a boat" and "formed a gang of cronies" (Gu and Liu 2005: 463; trans. Karlgren 1950: 11, no. 16), and there are further references to past events and persons, for instance to the establishment of administrative units and a "foolish" Miao prince (Gu and Liu 2005: 463; trans. Karlgren 1950: 12, no. 17). In "Hong fan" 洪範, Prince Ji 箕子 recalls how Gun 鯀 caused disorder at the time of the flood and was killed as a result, to be succeeded by Yu (Gu and Liu 2005: 1146; trans. in Karlgren 1950: 29–30, no. 3). "Jiu gao" 酒誥 records a speech, probably made by King Cheng 成 (r. 1042/35–1006 BCE) or the Duke of Zhou in his name, which states how moderately people were drinking under the Shang, including various regional rulers (Gu and Liu 2005: 1403; trans. in Karlgren 1950: 45, no. 9).

diminished. Afterwards, early medieval texts such as *Liuzi* 劉子 and *Shuijing zhu* 水經注 still cite the story, but they no longer creatively engage with it. On van Els's interpretation, "the fall of the Western Han was the start of a new period that created its own anecdotes", for instance those illustrating the habitus of early medieval elites which found their way into the enormously influential *Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語. So by that time "anecdotes about earlier Chinese historical figures had gone past their expiration date." (p. 352) But isn't this begging the question? What was it that made ancient narratives unpalatable to medieval audiences and liable to be thrown out for good? Why would readers marvel at the shenanigans of upper-crust figures in *Shishuo xinyu* rather than revisit the exploits of Duke Wen?

In sum, the volume establishes beyond doubt the central role of narrative accounts in intellectual debate. But, even at the risk of seeming pedantic, one might ask: Does the label "anecdote" equally fit all the texts under discussion? Does a narrative which, in translation, runs to almost two printed pages and contains a long speech which provides the frame for yet another historical narrative (pp. 116–117; Li Wai-yee) resemble in interesting ways brief reports which lack any discernible plot and only make up one to two paragraphs in English (pp. 314–315; Krijgsman)? Would either count as a typical anecdote?

As the editors note in their introduction, the earliest meaning of "anecdote" is that of a brief, pithy narrative left out and distinct in nature from the official record (p. 4). While more anodyne understandings of the term simply come down to an account of some past event, there is, in common parlance, often a hint of the illicit and subversive involved – the frisson of the embarrassing, revealing, or ironic. Such expectations are aptly captured by the editor of an anthology of literary anecdotes who, tongue-in-cheek, hearkens back not quite to Adam and Eve, but gets rather close: "The urge to exchange anecdotes is as deeply implanted in human beings as the urge to gossip. It is hard to believe that cavemen didn't practice their skills as anecdotalists as they sat around the fire."[13] Few of the accounts discussed in this volume bespeak a similar urge to share revelatory gossip, even though the example from *Han Feizi* discussed in the editors' introduction certainly does (pp. 1–2, 13–16). One may also wonder whether anecdotes proper were often used promiscuously to illustrate *different* points, since they rather seem to bring out features considered typical of a particular personality or situation. More generally, one could ask whether certain stories or narrative types were more closely tied to stable interpretations than others, as Van Auken suggests.

13 Gross ed. 2006: vii.

Perhaps, then, the next logical step in the analysis of ancient narratives would be to look out for further genre categories which can be productively applied to the sources, whether these categories are to be developed out of Chinese or Western literary and historiographic traditions, or whether they are to be newly defined on some other basis to serve a particular research question. Pines's article alerts us to the fact that there is a need to capture hitherto neglected aspects of ancient narrative, and a more fine-grained classification may bring forth novel insights.

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